

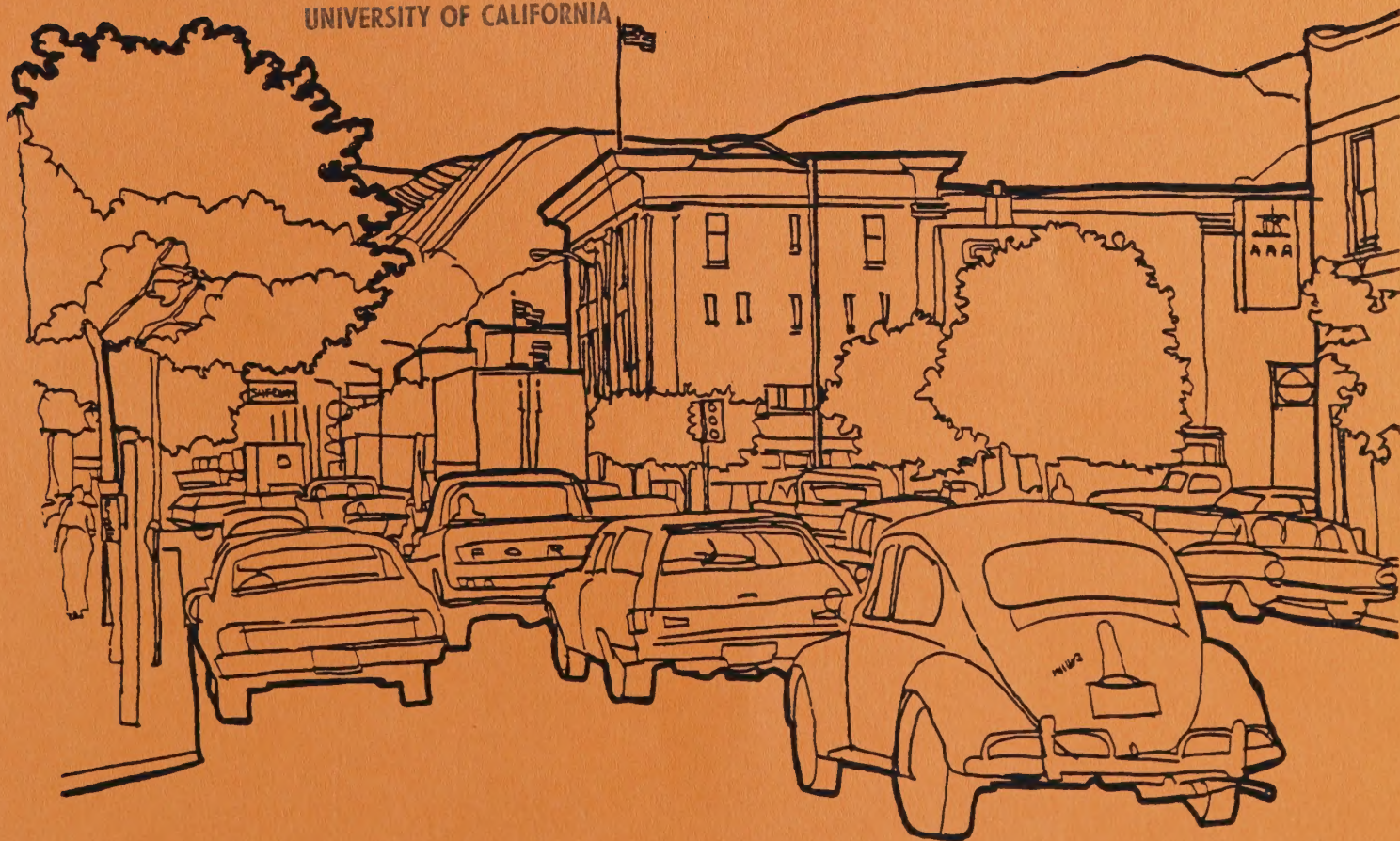
# city of san luis obispo

## GOALS FOR DOWNTOWN

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## INTRODUCTION

The downtown shopping area along Monterey, Marsh, and Higuera Streets has existed for over a hundred years and continues to be an active and enjoyable part of the city. While many of us take the downtown for granted, the experience of other cities shows that things can change for the worse. When people don't like to shop downtown because of blighted conditions, traffic congestion, or lack of parking spaces, the appearance and economic health of the downtown can suffer.

Major problems haven't yet developed in downtown San Luis Obispo. To keep ahead of the possible problems, the City Council has started to plan for downtown's future. Plans are under way for improving downtown streets and pedestrian areas and building more parking spaces. City planners are also writing new zoning and subdivision regulations which will guide the future use of land in the downtown.

As a first step in planning the downtown's future, the City Council needs to spell out in general terms what it feels should happen in the downtown shopping area and who should do it. For example, if the council agrees that we need more parking spaces to make downtown shopping easier, then the city should say that it will provide more spaces and identify who should help put up the money (city government, county government, or downtown businessmen). On the next few pages are examples of what staff planners believe should be done.

After the City Council studies and adopts this report (or one something like it) it will guide staff planners and consultants in completing more detailed plans that affect the downtown. The list of downtown goals and objectives is split up into five parts:

- The Downtown Economy
- Public Facilities
- Downtown Parking
- Downtown Circulation
- Land Use

Each part begins with a paragraph or two which tells what we feel are the key issues which must be tackled by the city and dealt with by this goals statement and upcoming city plans and programs.





## PART I - THE DOWNTOWN ECONOMY

The downtown is the city's largest shopping area. Over 1.3 million square feet of floor space provides merchandise and services to all city and area residents. While most stores and offices are small, the downtown offers a wide variety of things to buy and experience. The types of stores in the downtown and the reasons why people shop there have been slowly changing over the past five to 10 years. Some of the more traditional stores (such as Sears) have moved out of the downtown. Sears and others have been replaced with shops selling speciality goods or catering to the tourist trade. Very few new buildings have been built in the downtown, but many of the older ones are being more heavily used. There are few vacant stores and sales information shows that businessmen are doing reasonably well.

Obviously the downtown is not the only place in the area to do business. With new shopping centers in other parts of the city and county attracting more customers the future of downtown is not certain. Many cities in California and the U.S. have the same concern for the economic future of their downtowns. Some have had problems with a large number of downtown stores losing customers and going out of business. This can eventually lead to a lack of building maintenance and generally blighted conditions.

Downtown slums are not just a "big city" problem. They have developed in cities the size of San Luis Obispo. Once they get started, curing them requires a lot of money and effort -- which usually has to come from all city residents.

So far, the downtown appears to be in sound financial condition. The big questions are: Will it stay that way? How can (or should) the city government help the downtown remain an economically healthy shopping area, employment center and community asset?

### Goals and Policies

Keeping the downtown healthy is the responsibility of both the city government and downtown businessmen. The city wants to make sure the downtown remains the most fully developed shopping area in San Luis Obispo. To do this the city will:

- Be responsible for planning the downtown's future and coordinating private development and public projects.
- Use its land-use and zoning regulations to help protect the economic position of the downtown. City-wide zoning and the general plan should prevent the construction of new shopping centers which could cause downtown stores to go out of business.
- Use its influence to make sure the downtown doesn't put all its (proverbial) eggs in one basket. The downtown has a better chance of staying economically healthy if it keeps the variety of activities that



it has now. Government offices, private offices, stores, cultural facilities (such as the library and museum) and housing -- all should have a place downtown.

People living in other parts of the county have been shopping in downtown San Luis Obispo for many years, but this pattern will change. As other cities in the county grow, more stores will be built in these communities and fewer people will come to San Luis Obispo - especially for day-to-day convenience shopping. The downtown will continue to provide specialty goods and services to people in other parts of the county. However, the city and local merchants should expect the role of the downtown to slowly change.

The economics of the downtown's future should be guided by these principles:

- In the future, downtown shops should expect to cater mainly to city residents, rural households, and residents of smaller outlying communities which lack the necessary facilities. For certain outlets tourism will remain an important source of sales.
- City land-use and zoning controls should not discourage major regional stores (such as a large department store) from building in the downtown. In fact, the downtown is the first location in San Luis Obispo where this type of use should be allowed, provided it is in scale with the downtown.

Downtown San Luis Obispo will remain economically healthy if it continues to attract city shoppers and tourists. Part of the reason people come downtown is that it is a convenient and enjoyable place to visit. Both local government and downtown merchants have spent a lot of time and money improving the downtown environment.

These policies should guide future improvements:

- Local shop owners should be responsible for maintaining and fixing up their own buildings. The city encourages the renovation of some of the older buildings to show off their original turn-of-the-century architecture.
- Both the downtown merchants and the city should work on ways of making sidewalk areas more usable and enjoyable -- to give shoppers more room to window-shop, for one thing. Reducing downtown traffic congestion and the noise and pollution that go with it would help do this.



- The city and county should be responsible for enlarging cultural facilities or building new ones.
- The city and county governments and downtown businessmen should share the cost of building facilities which directly serve downtown shoppers, residents, and employees, including new parking lots and structures.

## PART II - PUBLIC FACILITIES

The downtown is not just a shopping area. Most city residents and many people living in the county come downtown often to visit public facilities and deal with government agencies -- to pay their property taxes at the courthouse or water bills at City Hall, buy stamps and mail packages at the post office, pick up and return books to the public library, or wander through Mission Plaza and visit the County Historical Museum and Art Center. The mission, Art Center, museum, and Mission Plaza also attract many tourists to the downtown.

City and county offices, offering a wide range of services, are concentrated along Palm Street in the area planners call the "civic center." City Hall, the courthouse, and the courthouse annex are the heart of this government center. The civic center has been part of the downtown as long as most of the downtown's older stores. San Luis Obispo has been the county seat since 1850: the courthouse site at Osos and Monterey streets has been used for county offices since 1873.

The civic center is one of the city's largest employment centers. More than 500 government employees work within this two block area. Many of the downtown stores depend on government employees for a big part of their sales. In addition, many private offices (such as lawyers, architects and real estate firms) are located near the civic center for easy access.

What happens to the civic center in the future is critical to the stability of the downtown. For the past six years the County Board of Supervisors has been preparing a master plan for all county buildings in the city. While no final decisions have been made, the county has considered moving the courts and administrative offices out of the downtown. The City Council and downtown businessmen want the county to keep the courthouse and administration services downtown.

The downtown plan also needs to consider the future of public cultural facilities centered generally around Mission Plaza and the mission -- what planners call the city's "cultural center." The city needs a new and larger city-county library. There also has been talk of enlarging the county museum and Art Center, building a performing arts center (including a theater with 400 to 600 seats), or a new city recreation building.

The following list of goals and policies spells out what the city feels is the best way to plan for the future of the downtown civic and cultural centers.

### Goals and Policies

The Civic Center: The county courts and administration offices have



been an important part of the downtown for more than 100 years. They serve all county residents and help keep the downtown economy healthy. The City Council is concerned that downtown stores could lose customers and the overall downtown economy could suffer if county offices leave. Also, relocation of the county offices outside the downtown probably will not be convenient for county residents. The City Council feels that county offices should remain downtown permanently and form the heart of the civic center. The city continues to support the county-prepared "Alternate IV-C" plan which proposes courts, administration and related parking garages downtown. Other county functions could be located as part of a bi-polar solution to consolidating related government services.

- The courthouse block should continue to be used for county courts and offices. This block has enough area to allow existing buildings to be enlarged. Also, there is room for some office expansion or a county parking garage.
- The civic center should be enlarged to allow the expansion of existing government offices in the downtown. Both city and county governments should consider property along Palm Street between Santa Rosa and Chorro Streets as a good location for future government buildings.
- The location of the other city and county government facilities should be guided by "public facilities objectives" spelled out within the San Luis Obispo General Plan Land-Use Element.

As the county and city population grow, so will the need for more government offices. We can't keep the downtown civic center strong by simply asking the county government to keep its offices where they are. If the city wants to retain county offices as a key part of the civic center, it must take direct and immediate action.

- Continue working with the county to put together a master plan for enlarging the civic center along Palm Street.
- The city and county should set up an authority and adopt a long-range parking and office building program (described on page 7 of this report). Parking garages should be built near the Courthouse block to conveniently serve people using county and city offices and downtown stores.
- The city should be responsible for working out the details of the parking program. The first step would be to continue purchasing property near the courthouse. The second step would be to build a multi-level parking garage.
- Before the multi-level garage is built, downtown merchants should commit to helping pay for parking spaces in the new structure(s).
- The city should help replace substandard sewer and water pipes in the civic center area so new county and city offices will have adequate service.



- The city should give a high priority to improving streets throughout the city that will help relieve downtown traffic congestion.

A Cultural Center: Cultural facilities also help bolster the downtown economy. The Old Mission, Mission Plaza, the County Historical Museum and the Art Center attract many tourists and are heavily used by county residents. Stores along Mission Plaza also help create an enjoyable environment.

- The city should work with county government to prepare a master plan for cultural facilities -- a cultural center -- in the downtown.
- The cultural area should be enlarged to allow new buildings and the expansion of existing ones. Property along Monterey and Palm streets between Chorro and Nipomo is a logical area for new public buildings.
- Within the cultural center area, the city should buy land for a new central library and related parking. The city should use its "library fund" to help purchase the property, while the county should pay for the construction of the new library building. The old library on Palm Street could be converted to government offices.
- The city also should consider expanding the existing county museum and city Art Center, and building a performing arts center (including a theater with 400 to 600 seats) within the cultural center area.
- Construction plans for the extension of Mission Plaza between Nipomo and Broad Streets should be completed and the project built.
- As new buildings are constructed along San Luis Creek south of Nipomo Street, the city should make sure enough land is reserved to allow creekside public walkways and landscaping to extend Mission Plaza.

### PART III - DOWNTOWN PARKING

There are about 4,300 parking spaces in the downtown. Unlike most California cities, almost 43% of these are parallel spaces along downtown streets. Public parking lots account for about 16%. The rest are privately owned and maintained.

Finding an empty parking space can be a problem if you're trying to shop, work, or live in the downtown. As the city grows, more and more cars are using the area's streets and filling up curb-side spaces and public parking lots. Trying to find a spot right in front of the store where you want to shop is almost impossible. In the heart of



downtown, most parking spaces are filled 90% of the time. One of the reasons for this is that some people who work downtown also use the most convenient spaces. Since they usually park all day, these spaces are not available to shoppers or visitors.

However, if you're willing to walk a little, some spaces are almost always open in the public parking lots or along streets surrounding the downtown.

The need for more downtown parking has been pointed out by both city residents and traffic consultants. A survey taken about four years ago shows that more people would shop downtown if there were more parking spaces. In 1977 the city hired a traffic engineering firm to study the downtown parking problem and come up with some solutions. The results of their study show that about 400 more parking spaces are needed. This need will grow as the city grows and new stores and public buildings are built downtown.

The following list of goals and policies is based on the recommendations of the traffic consultant.

### Goals and Policies

The City Council should implement a long-range parking program. This program should make sure there is enough downtown parking for tourists, employees, shoppers, and for people visiting government or private offices.

The city should try to reduce the demand for parking by promoting other forms of transportation such as bicycles, walking, busses, and ridesharing.

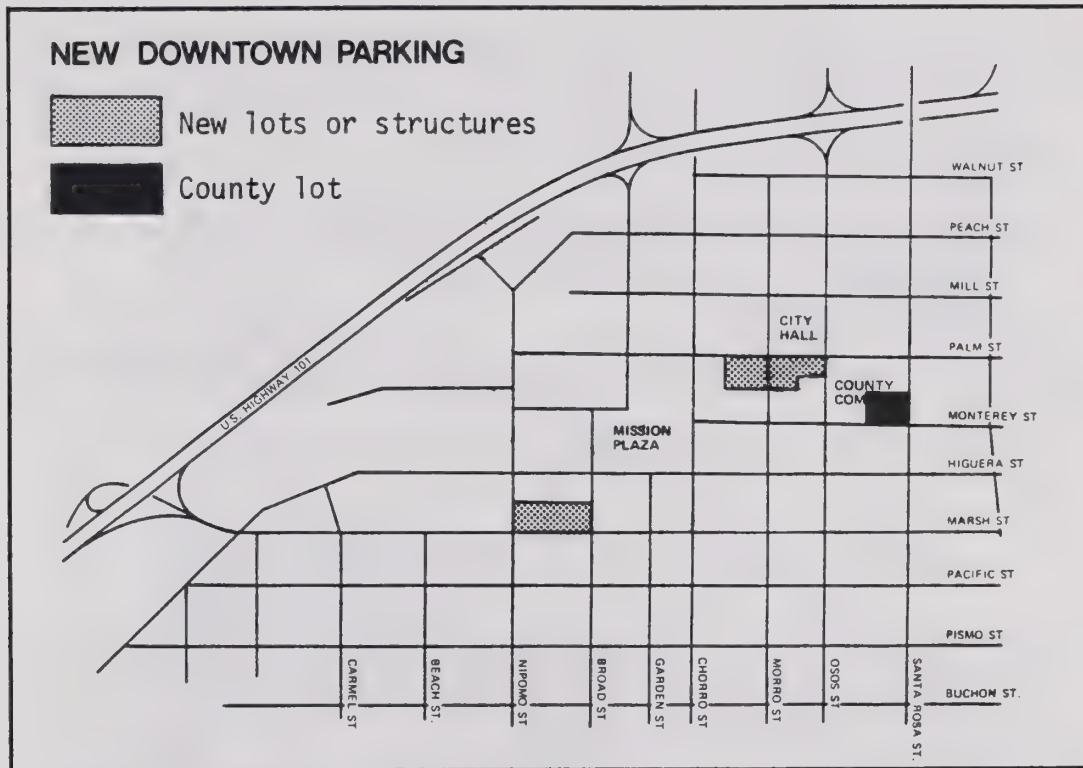
Parking Needs: The parking program identifies how many more parking spaces are needed now and in the future. Our estimates of future parking needs assume that the car will remain the most-used means of transportation. If people drive less in the future and use other transportation (such as buses, bicycles, or walking), fewer parking spaces may be needed downtown.

- About 400 spaces are needed right now to serve downtown stores and county government offices.
- If more stores and offices are built downtown, possibly as many as about 900 more spaces will be needed by 1990.
- If new county government offices are built downtown about 700 more spaces may be needed by 1990. Some of these spaces may be supplied by the county when an enlarged county office complex is built.

New Parking Lots and Garages: New parking lots or garages should be built within one or two blocks of the stores or offices they serve. The parking program pinpoints convenient downtown locations. (The City's parking consultant has recommended 4 sites, shown on the map on page 8. Other sites may also be appropriate.)



Existing Parking Lots: Parking garages at new locations may allow the city to close some of the older parking lots which are in poor locations and cause traffic congestion. The parking program should point out which public and private parking lots should be kept and which can be phased out.



Curbside Parking: Some of the downtown's most convenient parking spaces are on the streets. The city should continue to provide these curbside parking spaces in most of the downtown.

- Some curbside parking may be removed if it is replaced by spaces in conveniently located parking lots or garages. For example, the city may want to remove parking along parts of Monterey and Higuera streets and widen sidewalks to handle more shoppers.

Along other downtown streets (such as Chorro Street) parking may be removed to help reduce traffic congestion.

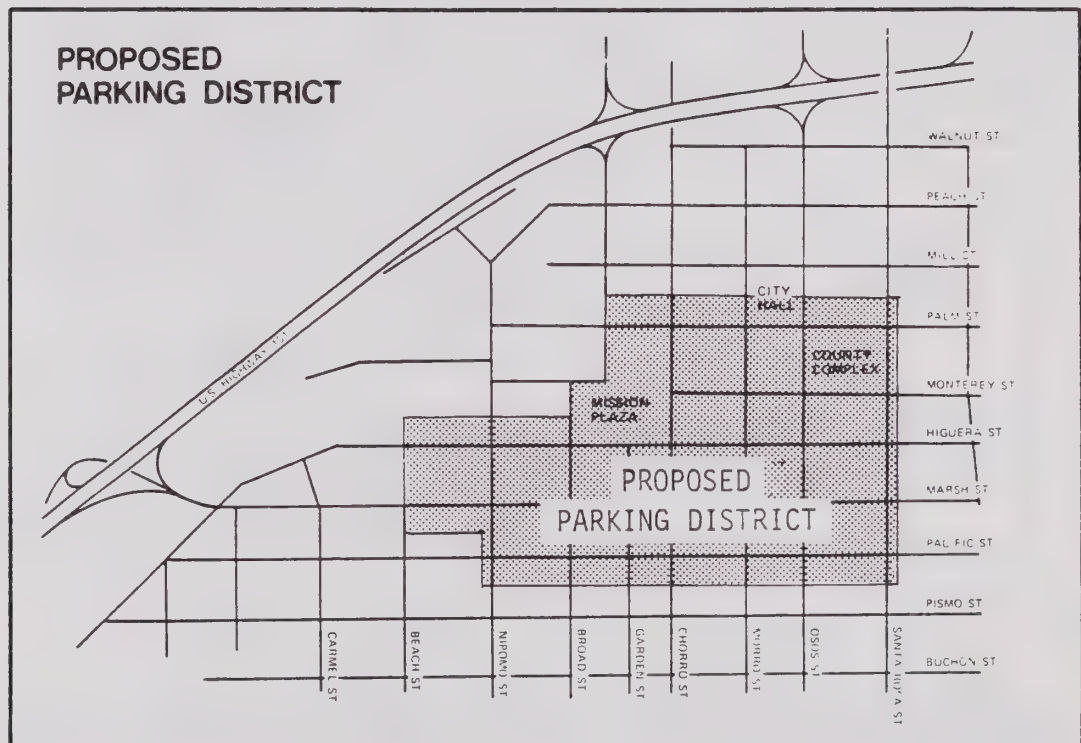
- Curbside parking should be reserved for downtown shoppers and tourists. People who work downtown should use spaces along streets surrounding the heart of downtown or in all-day public parking lots.

Downtown employees should also be encouraged to leave their cars at home and use other means of transportation (such as the city buses, bicycles, or walking) to come to work.



Taking Action: Good intentions alone will not solve parking problems. The ideas outlined on pages 8 and 9 will work only if the city and county governments and downtown businessmen translate them into action. The City Council should adopt a parking implementation plan. Some of the key parts of a plan put together by the city's parking consultant are outlined below:

A Parking Authority: The City Council should set up what's called a parking authority and decide what parts of the downtown should be within a "parking improvement district". A preliminary sketch of a parking district is shown below.



- All stores, offices and government agencies inside the district boundary would be taxed to help pay for new parking lots and garages.
- The city would have to decide exactly how much each property owner within the district should be taxed. It is understood that downtown merchants and city and county government would share the cost of new parking lots or garages.
- The amount of parking taxes that each store owner would pay would depend on how much parking he would need to serve his customers and how much he would benefit from new parking facilities.



## City Zoning Regulations

The city's zoning regulations should be changed to create a new zone district for the downtown commercial area. The new "Central Commercial" district would:

- Include parking standards which apply to all land uses in the downtown, and
- Spell out the different ways that a business could meet parking requirements. Parking options could include providing on-site parking, providing off-site parking within a reasonable distance of the use, or participating in a parking authority set up by the city.

Building Schedule: The City Council should adopt a schedule for building new parking lots and garages downtown. This schedule should:

- Set priorities for buying property for new parking facilities.
- Pinpoint which new parking facilities should be built in the near future and which ones can wait.
- Spell out when the completion of new parking facilities will allow the city to close some of its older parking lots or remove some curbside parking.
- Specify under what circumstances the parking program would need to be updated.

## PART IV - DOWNTOWN CIRCULATION

Downtown streets were laid out more than 100 years ago. As in many older cities, major streets were originally designed so a team of horses pulling a wagon had enough room to turn around. At the time, city fathers did not foresee the invention of the automobile or expect the city to have 35,000 people by 1978, with an average of 2½ cars for each household.

Today downtown streets are crowded and traffic congestion is increasing. As the city population grows, more and more people will want to shop and visit downtown. Building new stores and public buildings in the downtown also will attract more people and cars to the area. Because it's sometimes hard to find a parking space in the heart of downtown, many shoppers or people going to government offices have to drive around the block several times before they find a convenient space. This adds to traffic congestion. Also, many people who want to drive across town are funneled through the downtown and add to the area's traffic congestion.

So far, downtown traffic is bad only during a few hours of each day. These "peak" traffic periods are between 8:00 and 9:00 a.m. and 4:00 and 5:00 p.m. Most of us can live with some congestion. However, if traffic conditions get much worse, it could become really



frustrating to drive downtown. People might be discouraged from shopping and visiting there. Also, for someone walking in the downtown, exhaust fumes and noise from slow-moving cars can be annoying. It's unhealthy too.

It won't be easy to solve the downtown traffic problems. For example, widening the streets would allow more cars to pass through downtown but would mean that many of the older buildings would have to be torn down. This would change the downtown's appearance. It would lose some of its "old town" charm.

The city's traffic consultant has suggested several solutions to downtown traffic problems.

### Goals and Policies

Actions that the city can take to improve downtown traffic circulation in the immediate future include the following:

- Some downtown street intersections should be rebuilt so cars can more easily make right-hand turns. This should be done only where it will not require removing buildings.
- A limited number of curb-side parking spaces (e.g. along Chorro Street between Monterey and Higuera streets) can be removed to allow better traffic flow.
- At some downtown intersections motorists cannot easily see traffic signals because their view is blocked by trees, signs, or buildings. At these intersections, traffic signals should be relocated, their design modified, or obstacles removed to improve visibility.
- Some downtown traffic congestion is caused by people searching for parking spaces. The city should build more off-street parking to help reduce downtown traffic.

Widening downtown streets would help reduce traffic congestion. But it would also require tearing down many historic and beautiful buildings. Therefore, it is unlikely that many of the downtown streets will be widened in the future. Yet the city can make it easier for people to drive to, from, and around the center of the city.

The city is working on a new circulation element for its general plan. This report will identify ways the city can improve community circulation, including traffic flow in the downtown. The circulation element will describe specific projects and programs that will improve downtown circulation.



Circulation planning in the downtown should be guided by the following principles:

- The city should focus on making existing streets work better. Minor changes to the streets (such as those mentioned above) which will improve traffic flow should be made before major street projects are undertaken.
- Major street projects (e.g. building new streets or widening old ones) should be done only when they will significantly improve traffic circulation and benefit the community. Where possible, they should be done in a way that avoids disrupting existing housing areas or businesses. Important historic and architecturally significant buildings should not be destroyed.
- The city will encourage other types of transportation as a means of reducing traffic in the community and the downtown. People who live close to the downtown and work or shop there should walk, ride a bicycle, or ride the city bus if possible.

#### PART V: LAND USE

Over the past 125 years downtown San Luis Obispo has slowly been developing. What started as a few adobe stores and homes surrounding the old Mission has grown into a 40-block business district with over 1.3 million square feet of retail floor space. The downtown has the greatest variety of stores, entertainment facilities, public buildings, and offices in the county. It is the city's largest shopping center.

What will happen to existing downtown stores? Will the same types of stores continue to sell their merchandise to the community, or will they be replaced by something different? Today, a variety of businesses compete for the limited amount of the vacant floor space and land in the downtown. Some new businesses may continue to attract shoppers downtown. Others that are more specialized or don't depend on pedestrian shoppers might be better located in other parts of the city. If the community wants the downtown to remain San Luis Obispo's largest shopping area, city laws and plans should encourage appropriate types of land use, while discouraging others.

To some extent the city zoning ordinance and general plan already provide this type of guidance. However, some fine-tuning of existing land use policies may help preserve the things we like about the downtown and also guide its future growth.

The downtown land use map shown on the following page was drawn by the city planning staff. It is very similar to the general plan adopted by the City Council in 1977. Specific goals and policies are suggested for each of the different land use areas shown on the map. These policies were designed as additions to the broader ones already spelled out by the city's general plan. If fully carried out, they may eventually require changes to existing city ordinances which control downtown land use.



# city of san luis obispo

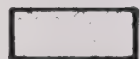
## DOWNTOWN SPECIFIC PLAN - PROPOSED LAND USE



THE COMMERCIAL CORE



COMMERCIAL EXPANSION AREAS



CIVIC CENTER/CULTURAL CENTER



FINANCIAL OFFICE DISTRICT



SERVICE COMMERCIAL DISTRICT



RESIDENTIAL AREAS





## Goals and Policies

The commercial core is the most active part of the downtown. It has the greatest variety of retail stores in San Luis Obispo, a few scattered offices, and some specialized housing. Stores along Higuera and Monterey streets between Santa Rosa and Nipomo streets attract the most pedestrians. Some sections of Marsh Street also attract a lot of pedestrians. Very few businesses provide parking for their employees or customers.

These policies and priorities should be applied to the commercial core:

- Many older buildings in the downtown should be rehabilitated to show off their turn-of-the-century character. The historic conservation element being prepared by the city should designate areas where older buildings should be preserved and areas where they can be replaced with new structures. New buildings should be in scale and character with existing downtown architecture.
- The commercial core should be used primarily for retail businesses serving the entire community. The ground floor should be reserved for retail stores and entertainment facilities which depend on pedestrian traffic.
- Offices and new housing should be given second priority for the use of limited downtown land and building space. They should be above the first floor to avoid breaking the flow of pedestrian activity at street level. (An exception to this policy might be utility offices which attract a lot of walk-in customers.) The city should encourage the rehabilitation of apartments in the commercial core when they need it. If any new housing is developed in the core, it should be protected from street noise, have its own access and include enough parking for tenants.
- Keeping existing residential units as housing should have priority over converting them to offices or stores when they serve people with low incomes, the elderly or others who need to live downtown to enjoy a full life. This includes hotels now used as permanent housing.
- Development in the present commercial core should not go beyond the point where it creates unacceptable traffic problems.

Retail expansion areas: If the city continues to grow, there will probably be a need for more retail space downtown. Rather than tearing down buildings in the core area to allow larger and taller structures, the city should allow the commercial core to expand into the areas shown on the (proposed) land-use map.

Expansion areas include sections of Monterey and Higuera streets north of Santa Rosa Street and sections of Higuera and Marsh streets south of Nipomo Street. These areas now include a mixture of retail stores, offices, automobile-related businesses and a few older homes. Many of the existing businesses provide their own on-site parking. Pedestrian traffic is relatively light.



These are the policies that should guide development in these retail expansion areas:

- The expansion areas eventually should be developed primarily with retail stores and shops. Offices should also be allowed on the ground floor without special permit requirements. Housing should be allowed above the first floor as long as it is protected from street noise, has its own access and includes enough parking for tenants.
- If the retail core expands in the future, some of the existing automobile sales lots and repair shops should make way for new retail stores. Eventually these auto-related businesses should be relocated to more appropriate service-commercial or industrial neighborhoods. For the immediate future, existing car lots should not be expanded and no new ones developed.
- Businesses should provide their own on-site parking spaces, provide conveniently located off-site parking or pay the city to build public parking lots in the area.

Financial and office areas are located in two parts of the downtown. The first is along Marsh and Pacific streets, already developed with offices. Most downtown banks, saving and loan companies, and title companies are located along Marsh Street.

The other is north of the downtown shopping area, along Santa Rosa and Walnut streets (see the map on p. 13). Some of the area is still used for housing.

Policies which should guide the use of land and buildings in these areas are as follows:

- Offices should have first priority for the use of land and buildings. This probably will mean that some existing housing and retail businesses will eventually be converted to offices.
- The Marsh Street corridor should be the primary location for larger downtown offices such as banks, saving and loan companies, large insurance offices, and title companies.
- Smaller offices, which attract fewer customers and less traffic, should be developed along Pacific Street and parts of Pismo Street. Houses should be converted to offices rather than be replaced by new structures.
- The six-block area north of Mill Street should be used for small to medium-size offices which deal with government agencies within the civic center complex. Banks and other financial institutions should not be developed in this area.



- The area along Santa Rosa and Walnut streets should be used for small to medium-size offices which deal with government agencies within the civic center complex. Banks and other financial institutions should not be developed in this area.
- Office owners should be responsible for providing enough parking on their property for their customers and employees.
- Office areas are usually adjacent to residential districts or are partly developed with housing. New office buildings should generally not be more than two stories high. This provision should help new offices to "blend in" with existing housing and to be in scale with the neighborhood. It will also help limit the amount of additional downtown street traffic created by new office development.





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